

EXPRESSIONS OF PRAYER

BACKGROUND READING



St. Gregory of Nazianzus, an early Doctor of the Church, said, “We must remember God more often than we draw breath.” To us this might seem like impossible advice. After all, can we name even one thing that we think about at all times? But St. Gregory’s advice doesn’t mean that we are supposed to be consciously reflecting upon God all the time. It means that our actions and thoughts should come from a heart overflowing with the love of God. Actions flowing from a loving heart not only bring us to God, they are a constant prayer. In this way, everything that we do then becomes an offering of prayer to God.

To have that conversion of heart that overflows with the love of God, we do need to set aside specific times of prayer to develop a relationship with God. As the *Catechism* explains, “We cannot pray ‘at all times’ if we do not pray at specific times, consciously willing it. These are special times of Christian prayer, both in intensity and duration” (CCC 2697). The Church gives us three major expressions of prayer to help us develop this relationship with God. These expression of prayer are: vocal, meditative, and contemplative.

Vocal prayer

Vocal prayer is prayer in which we use our voices to express to God what is in our hearts. Because we are made up of both body and soul, to utter with our body what is in our soul is an expression of our human nature. Jesus, both as our Creator God and sharing in our human nature, knew that vocal prayer would be a necessary expression for us in developing a relationship with His Father.

We remember from a previous lesson that, when Jesus’ disciples saw Him quietly at prayer one day, they approached Him and asked Him to teach them how to pray. Jesus responded to them by giving them the vocal prayer that we know as the Our Father. Scripture records Jesus vocally praying many times to the Father, for example, when He raised Lazareth from the dead, or in the Garden of Gethsemane, or from His Cross. Through His own example, Jesus showed us the need to express our prayer out loud.

We can use our voices to pray traditional prayers such as the Our Father or the Hail Mary, or we can vocally express our own spontaneous prayers that arise from within our hearts and minds. The *Catechism* also recommends that group prayer be often vocal, when it says,

“Because it is external and so thoroughly human, vocal prayer is the form of prayer most readily accessible to groups” (CCC 2704).

For vocal prayer, we should remember that it is not how many words we say that makes our prayer pleasing to God, but rather the attitude of our hearts. Jesus had strong criticism for those who were constantly praying with many words, but their hearts were far from God. He said, “Well did Isaiah prophesy about you hypocrites, as it is written: ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me’” (Mark 7:6-7a).

Meditative Prayer

In meditation, we use our thoughts and imagination to seek to know God’s will for our lives. When describing meditation, the *Catechism* says, “Meditation is above all a quest. The mind seeks to understand the why and how of the Christian life, in order to adhere and respond to what the Lord is asking” (CCC 2705). More than anything, meditation seeks to answer the question “Lord, what do you want me to do?” (CCC 2706).

The prayer of meditation engages our thoughts, imagination, desires, and emotions. It involves the full spectrum of our mental faculties to give us an increased understanding and faith, and a conversion of heart to desire the things of God. Meditation strengthens our will so that we can say yes to whatever God asks of us. Reading the Scripture and the writings of the saints can be effective tools for meditation. We reflect on these holy writings to see how those words apply to and shape our own lives. Above all, Christian prayer meditates on the mysteries of Christ, such as found in *Lectio Divina* or the Rosary.

Contemplative Prayer

In contemplative prayer we fix our hearts on Jesus. St. Teresa of Ávila, a Doctor of the Church, says: “Contemplative prayer in my opinion is nothing else than a close sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with Him who we know loves us” (CCC 2709). It is the inner prayer that takes place in our hearts. In contemplative prayer, led by the Holy Spirit, we surrender ourselves completely to the Lord “as an offering to be purified and transformed” (CCC 2711).

Contemplative prayer is a free and undeserved gift from God in which we enter into communion with Him through the Holy Spirit. It takes place in silence, and is an intense time of prayer in which God strengthens us so that we can say yes to His will. During contemplation, we fix our gaze so completely on Jesus that we renounce our self—our self-will that stems from an attachment to sin—and are purified to love and serve God and others. The person who enters into this prayer knows that he or she has nothing of his or her own, and is nothing without God. Only the poor and the humble can truly enter into contemplative prayer.

Prayer Is a Decision

Prayer, whatever expression it takes, is a decision. No matter how busy we are, no matter how dispirited, we must set aside a part of our lives with the firm intention to pray. Not only is this how we nourish our own spiritual lives, but it is how we act as examples of prayer to our children. The role of parents as “teachers of prayer” cannot be underestimated. The *Catechism* points out that “the *Christian family* is the first place of education in prayer” (CCC 2685). Parents

are the first ones who teach their children how to pray, just as Mary and Joseph are the first ones who taught Jesus how to pray. One of the greatest habits that parents give their children is attending the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass each and every Sunday as a family. Making this a nonnegotiable element

in Catholic family life will bring a lifetime of grace for each and every member. Just as the Apostles asked Jesus to teach them to pray after they had seen Him at prayer, so, too, can parents set that same powerful example in their children's lives.